

OLD KING LEAR'S DAUGHTER

Drawing by Clinton Balmer

BY EILEEN MORETTA

HE was eligible in the class of "none of them twenty and none of them married," being hardly eighteen.

Every evening, Sundays excepted, in the scant allowance of silk known as "tights," and the magnificent quantity of bespangled adornment that the "Stupendous Scenic Production" boasted, she descended the four flights of tortuous stairway from her airy of a dressing room to the terra firma of the stage, and, steering a careful course between the set Market Place in Marseilles and the devious litter of the unset Palace of Prince Populani of Popocatepetl, she ricocheted, at the proper cue, into the brilliant glamour of the footlights, to the ever critical pleasure of the hirsute-lacking gentlemen of the front rows, and the open admiration of those species of innocuous youth designated by the gallery god as "de Johnny boys."

Viewed from this enchanted land, she was a truly regal young person, superb of figure and classically beautiful of face. Seen from that dingy environ, the hunting, or more appropriately the haunting, ground of the Johnny boy, the stage door, she was a slim, graceful girl, of most appealing refinement of loveliness, even in a rather shabby costume and a passé hat. So that, even fallen from her gorgeous estate, as it were, she challenged the attention of these backdoor gentlemen in waiting, as she nightly brushed past them, paying no more heed than had they been so much nebulae in space. Whereat would one Johnny boy be moved to remark to another, peevishly watching the proud young figure as it disappeared down the alley, "Deuced fine filly; but too high steppin'. Not my style, deah boy." And, his twin languidly assenting, they would hail with relief Tottie and Trixie emerging, blond and saucy, and with a healthy appetite for small birds and large bottles.

From which it may be gathered that "Old King Lear's" daughter was *in*, not *of*, the chorus.

On occasions, in the shadow of an adjacent doorway, might be seen an old man waiting for the nightly appearance, or more correctly the exit, of this Cordelia. A vast difference was there in the appearances of this old man. At times he would stand tall and erect, and it was then easily seen that he had been an exceptionally handsome man in his day, and the girl's wonderful face and carriage were rightfully hers by inheritance. And at such times a look of mingled pride, appeal, and wistful tenderness would cross his face when she would come to him where he waited; and he would bestow her ungloved hand upon his threadbare coatsleeve with much of the chivalric grace that had made him, in his generation, the matinée idol of the hour.

But oftener, alas! the figure, bent and shrunk, shambled out from the shadow, muttering incoherent reproaches at her tardiness, and lamentations at his own hard fate in being forced to wait, "a poor old man in all biting weathers," and giving forth an unmistakable odor of much cheap whisky. At such times she never took his arm,—indeed, he never thought to offer it,—but walked in proud silence by his side. Sometimes, as on this night, he never came at all.

She had not expected him,—for three nights, now, she had known he would not come,—yet she glanced, hoping against all hope, to the place where he should have been, and caught her breath in a sharp little sob, seeing it vacant. A moment, too, she leaned heavily against the stage door. She was weary and heartsick, and the snow was falling coldly and unsympathetically, and the gay mockery of the Great White Way just beyond seemed hideous.

SOMEONE within caroling blithely pulled open the door, averting the resultant catastrophe only by deftly catching her as she swayed backward. "Did I hurt you?" exclaimed he of the melody. "I startled you terribly. I'm so sorry!" Handsome and broad shouldered, he stood penitent as a schoolboy.

He had held her but the fraction of a second; but a swift rose had swept across the startled pallor of her face, hidden mercifully by the darkness. "No—no!" she answered hurriedly. "It was my fault. I was leaning against the door. I—I was tired, for a moment. Good-night."

She would have passed; but he detained her with the easy, careless assurance of him to whom the world offers all things good, and peering down into her face, white now, startlingly so, in the dim light.

"You don't look well," he asserted. "You're all used up, you poor, tired girl! See here, old Ki—er—your father, he isn't here tonight. I'm going to see you safely home."

"No—no—no!" It was a frightened cry.



"Could Such a Cur Sink Lower than to Become a Thief?"

It puzzled him, so startled and intense it was; then he laughed. "Oh, you're afraid they'll chatter. Well, I'll see to that." He flung a backward glance of purposeful meaning at the door, and his mouth tightened. Then he looked back at her and smiled. "Come," he said, and his eyes spoke likewise. They were singularly clear, unspoiled eyes, good to look into. Indeed, the entire company, from prima donna down to the humblest of her kind, adored, secretly or openly, according to their respective temperaments, the eyes of the star.

But the girl was not looking at him. Her glance had wandered to the vacant spot where the father should have been but was not. In the empty space she seemed to see a bent, huddled figure, cringing of mien, bleared of eye, who had taken with drunken deference, a few evenings ago, the pieces of silver carelessly tossed him, in answer to his whining plea, by this man. Her whole face hardened. She looked impassively into the handsome, eager one before her.

"Thank you, no," she said. "I prefer to go alone." And she passed him, no longer attempting to detain her, walking swiftly through the gloom of the alley out into the street.

A sibilant whistle escaped him. "A regular facer!" he muttered, staring hard after the disappearing figure. "Fair and square between the eyes, my boy—and from old drunken King Lear's daughter!" Slowly he swung out into the glare and glitter of Broadway. Far up the street he could see the black dress, like a dark thread against cloth of gold, weaving its way among the gorgeous pageant of the theater supper crowds.

"She looked so tired," he murmured regretfully. "She must have a deuce of a time of it, old drunken King Lear's daughter. Poor little girl! Poor—little—girl! I—I think I'll go home. To the blazes with that poker bunch!"

IN the tiny three-room "furnished" flat old King Lear's daughter was just turning on the feeble gas. The odor that assailed her was unmistakable: no need to push aside the faded portières to behold the inert form on the bed, a mass of winter-white hair tossed and tousled across the pillow. She stood gazing down on it in silence,—the spectacle of an old man, and one whom the Scriptures bade her honor, recovering from a four days' debauch.

After a space two eyes, with all their splendid fires burned out, blinked up at her. "That you, Cordelie?" whimpered a voice. "I couldn't come tonight."

"I know," she replied. She stared down at the flat black bottle on the floor, where the feeble yellow gas-flare struck across it. To her it appeared like some

hideous imp, grinning fiendishly up at her. It had wrecked a splendid brain, and all the manhood of a man of noble physique and generous soul. It had broken one woman's heart. It was devastating her own life, eating out its heritage of love and happiness which is the Heaven-given right of youthful womanhood, robbing it even of the bare necessities of life, that its beastly appetite might be appeased.

She stared fascinated at the devilish thing, and a querulous voice maundered across her bitter thought. "Is there a drink left, Cordelie," it whimpered, "one little drink?"

"There is none." She stooped and picked up the thing, holding it up for him to see, and placed it quietly on the table. In a melodrama she would have hurled it from her, breaking it as her young life was being broken; but in the dramas of real life these climactic episodes are wanting.

Instead she went and stood by the window in the little kitchen. The snow came down steadily; it was covering the sordid wretchedness of the narrow court, and flinging a charitable mantle over the dirty old wall, sodden and sooted with poverty's ashes. And against this background, to her dreaming eyes, there stood a splendid young figure of self-respecting manhood, with a face that it was good to look upon, and eyes—she caught her breath a little sharply. There had been kindness, tenderness almost, in those brilliant, unspoiled eyes. Was it only pity? Almost, he had seemed to care. If—if—

A muttering from the adjoining room roused her. She turned with a bitter little smile, too old for such young lips. Visions like these were not for such as she, "Old King Lear's daughter," even in dreams.

IT had ceased snowing the next day, and a brilliant sun was scintillating across a wide, white world. Something of its sparkle went into her heart as she adjusted her hat and veil,—hurriedly; for it was a matinée day, and she was late. She had tidied the flat; mended a rent in the shabby gown; made toast and gruel for the fretful, shaken old man. She must hasten now to transform herself from Cinderella into the magnificence of a princess befitting a "Stupendous Production." She glanced about the bare little walls—it seemed so grotesque, that transformation! And the petted matinée darlings—there would be droves of them; for the star was their present fetish—actually envied her! "You can speak to him, really," one had gushingly said to her once. Yes, one could, perhaps. A little smile trembled on her lips. When one is barely eighteen, all light and hope seem not utterly quenched

out of life, when it is a wide, white day, and the sun is shining.

But from the room beyond came a sharp cry, something not unlike the bark of an angry, yet enfeebled old dog. "Cordelia, I must have a drink. I must have a drink, I tell you!"

"I have made you some broth, Father," she said. "I couldn't get you a drink if I would. I haven't even carfare: I walked up last night."

"It's a lie!" barked the voice. "You've always money, and you let your poor old father go without a drink! You lie! You lie!"

The high, thin voice rose to a crescendo of passion. He was in that pitiful state when opposing trifles are sparks that set fire to frenzy. Of a sudden he struggled upright, tossing back his white mane of hair. The old flames flashed up in the eyes, the trembling old hands shot up in imprecation, and in a wild burst he hurled forth that most awful of all anathemas, the Curse of Lear:

All the stor'd vengeance of heaven fall
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness!
You nimble lightings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs—

Houses had risen in bygone days at the marvel of that magnificent voice,—the genius that had shaken their souls in that stupendous outburst of a mighty reason tottering to its fall. Now it was grotesque; but, by the terrific sweep of its intent, it was also terrible. The curse, the awful meaning of the curse, was for her, his daughter.

"Father!" she cried brokenly. "Oh, Father!" Her trembling fingers groped behind her, feeling blindly for the door. A shudder shook her as a reed in a high wind. Then slowly she wrenched quivering body and soul together, riveting them to stoic calm, and went out. For it was a *matinée* day, forsooth! and she was late.

She had left behind her once more but a pitiable, besotted old man. Fallen back on the pillows, the voice trailed off inarticulately, "Serpent's tooth—thankless child." Presently, however, his eyes glinted craftily, and he fell feebly to studying.

THE great second act was on. The chorus had just trooped merrily from the stage. The calcium moon was slowly rising; for in a moment the prima donna began her favorite song, and woe betide the luckless moon manipulator if the brilliant splendor failed to flood her vocal way! The prima donna had gone on in haste and anger. Her maid, sent on an errand, had failed to return with the marvelous speed demanded by prima donnas of uncertain temper. The unhappy daughter of "Old King Lear," seeking a secluded corner in which to await the next hilarious entrance, and passing the prima donna's dressing room door, noted dully that it was ajar. In the same unthinking fashion she caught the sparkle and glitter of a coruscating something that seemed to swing out from space in a shaking hand.

She awoke suddenly for the first time that dazed afternoon. The splendid diamond necklace of the prima donna, which she valued as her soul,—some there were who said had valued more than her soul,—was swinging aglitter in an alien grasp. There was just a hand. Once she had seen the great Irving, making that wonderful exit of the broken Shylock in the Trial Scene, drag his hand across the door after his bent and defeated figure had stumbled through it. She had never forgotten that hand: it had fascinated her in its weird power of expression. And this hand that she stared at, that clutched that glittering string of jewels, what was

there about it that seemed to clutch her by the throat, strangling, choking, her? She stepped forward blindly, watching the hand. Then a gust of air from an unused open door blew the curtain aside, and the nightmare of the thing vanished, and she saw—

With an inarticulate gasp she was in the room. She had seized the shaking hands; and the crouching figure they belonged to lifted itself by the violence of surprise and fear, and Old King Lear faced his daughter.

"Go," she panted, "the way you came! Quick! Oh—" with one bitter, anguished cry. "You—my father!" Then imperatively, "Someone may come! Go! Go!"

Moving uncertainly, but with fascinated eyes ever on her face, and a sudden abasement in them that cut to his daughter's soul, the old man stumbled through the unused door by which he had come, and the curtains fell back into place. And it was at this moment that the prima donna burst into the room in a whirlwind of rage and pique at a cherished song gone wrong, and the string of diamonds fell between them, the leading lady and the girl of the chorus, to the floor.

THE prima donna had won success by grasping every situation. Also she hated this girl. "So," she sneered, "the immaculate Cordelia!" She laughed in a shrill, strained key, then turned to the door. "Bring the manager instantly," she demanded of the boy outside. And you," she laughed in the girl's face, "stay where you are, you thief!"

"Discharge her?" echoed the manager, when he had effected the instantaneous appearance and grasp of the situation demanded of all managers. "Yes, of course. But why before the entire company?"

"Because I wish it," retorted the imperious one. "And besides," craftily, "it would be well for the morals of the company. There may be other would-be thieves," she laughed again, "among the lot."

"All right," he acquiesced wearily. "If you make a point of it, of course; but—" He glanced at the still, erect figure of the culprit. She was so young, and there was a look in her eyes, even now! Why would these fool women leave their cursed baubles about for the tempting of God knew what poor devils! He frowned impatiently.

"Stage is waitin'!" bawled the boy, that call despotism from which there can be no question why, no pause to make reply. And a moment later the galaxy of beauty trooped on with merry tra-la-la, the daughter of "Old King Lear" in her accustomed laughing place. For of such is the kingdom of Thespis.

It was over at last, the tuneful little opera and the tragic-demanded afterpiece. To do him justice, the manager had been as lenient as possible,—far too lenient to make the spectacle quite as cruel as a malicious woman had demanded. However, it was enough, she thought, for her purpose,—to shame this upstart girl forever in the eyes of one man.

"You can go now," said the manager briskly to the young culprit so still and erect at this bar of judgment. "All of you clear out!" he ordered wrathfully. He liked little the role so thrust upon him. The girl was guilty, of course; but—

MISS CORDELIA, may I see you safely home?" It came like a thunderclap, that quiet, yet clear young voice. There was no striving for dramatic effect in it, though a better line the star of the company had never spoken. "I should be pleased if you would allow me the privilege."

Oh, he was of good, sound stock, this young favorite whom neither fortune nor the public could spoil! He stood quietly before her, oblivious of the gaping and

wonder, and one woman's rage and chagrin that whitened her cheeks even through their overabundant rouge. And he meant it! She stared at him breathless, this disgraced daughter of a dishonored father, and for one wild heartbeat's space of rapture knew that he meant it. Then she turned away silently, her trembling lips refusing the denial her pride and something—a passionate self sacrifice—demanded. It must not be! He, he of all men, should not share the shame that lay irrevocably upon her and hers!

AND suddenly, in the tenseness of that moment, there broke a shrill cry, an oath, and the sound of hurrying feet. Through the old stage door a figure came stumbling. Feeble tears ran down its face as it ran. "Tell them, tell them all!" it cried incoherently, and thrust aside all who would have stayed it. So, out upon the boards he had not trodden for years, came Old King Lear.

There he turned and faced them. His voice was hoarse and trembling with grief and shame; but he stood erect, as in the great days of his triumphs. "You called my girl a thief!" he cried. "Fools! Imbeciles all! My Cordelia wouldn't—couldn't—steal to save her life. You might have known it was I, the drunken old sot you have all jeered at as 'Old King Lear,'—the most damnable reprobate who ever misused as sweet a girl as ever lived, as loyal a daughter as ever slaved and starved for his worthless, rum-soaked soul. Could such a cur sink lower than to become a thief?"

He turned to the prima donna. "I came to see you," he cried. "I came to borrow, beg, or wheedle money. And I saw the accursed baubles, and I would have gone to lower mires of degradation; but she, my daughter—Oh, fools, fools, fools! You should have known she wouldn't steal, but would take the shame—to save—her father!"

His voice broke. Great tears were running down his furrowed cheeks. "Oh, God, my girl!" he whispered brokenly. And then, "Let's away!" he cried wildly, and struggled blindly up the stage.

A keen-eyed one cried out—but too late. They saw the old figure, in the semidarkness, stumble over the open trap, and so through and down into the blackness of the depths below.

He was still breathing when they brought him up and laid him gently down. No hands were lacking in help and ministrations; but it was only his daughter who knelt beside him that his old eyes saw.

"Cordelia, Cordelia," he whispered, "stay a little!" The broken mind swung back to the old nights, the old play that had made him famous. "What is't thou sayest?" he muttered. "Thou'lt come no more! Never—never—never—never!" His voice broke. The white head fell back against her knee; the eyes closed. "Hear the applause!" he murmured faintly. "But don't raise the curtain; for—the—lights—are—out!"

A piteous cry broke from the kneeling girl. "Oh, Father," she sobbed, "come back! You were all I had, and I am alone. Father, I am afraid!"

CORDELIA! It was a very gentle hand that rested on her shoulder, and yet compelled her upward look,—a tender face, with all its strength, that bent above her, with honest tears in the handsome eyes, and back of them, and shining for her, and her alone, the light that makes the whole world beautiful.

"Cordelia," said the voice, and it was like a caress, "may I take you home—now?" And a moment later, drawing her from her prostrate, stricken position upward to the shelter of his arms, "My sweetheart, come!"

And in that moment the daughter of poor "Old King Lear" knew that, even by the side of Death, she had come into her "ain faire cowntree" of Happiness and Love.

TORCHY BUGS THE SYSTEM

Drawings by F. Foster Lincoln

BY SEWELL FORD

GUESS I ain't mentioned Mortimer before. Didn't seem hardly worth while. You know—there are parties like that, too triflin' to do any beefin' about. But, honest, for awhile there first off this young shrimp that was just makin' his debut as one of Miller's subslaves in the bondroom did get on my nerves more or less. He's a slim, fine-haired, fair-lookin' young gent, with quick, nervous ways and a habit of holdin' his chin well up. No boob, you understand. He was a live one, all right.

And it wa'n't his havin' his monogram embroidered on his shirt sleeves or his wearin' a walkin' stick down to work that got me sore. But you don't look for the raw rebuff from one of these twelve-dollar file jugglers. That's what he slips me, though, and me only tryin' to put across the cheery greetin'!

"Well, Percy," says I, seein' him wanderin' around lonesome durin' lunch hour, "is it you for the Folies today, or are you takin' a chance on one of them new automatic grub factories with me?"

"Beg pardon?" says he, givin' me that frigid, distant look.

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"Thanks," Says He. "I Am Lunching at My Club."

"Ah, can the hauteur!" says I. "We're on the same payroll. Maybe you didn't notice me before, though. Well, I'm the guardian of the gate, and I'm offerin' to tow you to a new sandwich works that's quite popular with the staff."

"Thanks," says he. "I am lunching at my club." And at that he does a careless heel-spin, leavin' me stunned and gawpin'.

"Slap!" thinks I. "You will go doin' the little ray of sunshine act, will you? Lunchin' at his club! Now there's a classy comeback for you! Guess I'll spring that myself sometime. Score up for Percy!"

But I wa'n't closin' the incident at that, and, while in my position it wouldn't have been hardly the thing for me to get out the war club and camp on his trail,—him only a four-flushin' bond clerk,—I was holdin' myself ready for the next openin'. It comes only a few mornin's later when he strolls in casual about nine-thirty and starts to pike by into the cloakroom. But I had my toe against the brass gate.

"What name?" says I.

"Why," says he, flushin' up, "I—er—I work here."

"Excuse," says I, drawin' back the foot. "Mistook you for Alf Vanderbilt come to buy us out."

"Puppy!" says he explosive through his front teeth.

"Meanin' me?" says I. "Why, Algernon! How rough of you!"

He just glares back over his shoulder and passes on for his session with Miller. I'll bet he got it too; for here in the Corrugated we don't stand for